



2004 Legislative Session Progress Report to the Community

From Rep. Skip Priest – 30th Legislative District

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Dear Friends and Neighbors

I hope you'll take a moment to look over this legislative update. I believe the 2004 session was a productive one in terms of new solutions for education, affordable housing and health care for the needy among us.

Thanks so much for all your emails, letters, calls and visits. It's an honor to serve and represent you. My goal is to create solutions and solve problems to improve our lives and our communities for the better. You help me identify the challenges that face us. Please keep your communications coming.

Now that my Olympia work is complete for the 2004 legislative session, I plan to be out and about in the community participating in local events and meetings. I encourage you to let my office know of any functions that are scheduled to occur and for which you'd like my attendance or participation.

I am always interested in your opinions and questions and look forward to seeing many of you soon!

Sincerely,

Skip Priest
Skip Priest



A budget compromise that works

We passed a state budget that provides more money for higher education, reduces the monthly premiums families on Medicaid pay to as little as \$15, or nothing at all depending on income, and gives a 50 cent-an-hour raise to some 26,000 underpaid home health care workers.

Just as important, the 2004 supplemental budget doesn't raise taxes, doesn't cut core programs and leaves more than \$300 million in reserves for unexpected expenses. This is not as much as the state should have but it is significantly better than the governor's original proposal.

It should be noted that the Legislature, with my support, cautiously passed this supplemental spending bill recognizing we will likely face a \$1 billion budget shortfall in the next biennium. Of course, all existing state programs — and any growth in the number of Washingtonians served by those programs — have been planned for and will continue to be funded.

Leading the charge to create more opportunities in higher education

I will continue my work in higher education so that everyone who wants to attend college, and get a degree, can. This area doesn't benefit from the headlines the way that K-12 education does. But given the enrollment crisis we face, it's an extremely important issue for our local high school students, workers in need of retraining and just about anyone else that desires to better themselves through higher education.

In addition to ensuring the state budget will pay for the critical planning around any solution we create, I also worked to pass other higher education bills that help students "get to college." This includes growing the number of "branch campuses" of larger institutions across the state, including UW and WSU. Branch campuses must also reach out to students in under-served urban areas by expanding access to bachelor's and master's degree level education in local communities like Federal Way.

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Making K-12 education even better with a packet of education reforms

Improving the WASL

A new law to improve the Washington Assessment of Student Learning ensures that students will get an opportunity to retake the WASL up to four times at no cost. Students need only re-take the parts they don't pass the first time around. Starting in 2008 students must pass the WASL in reading, writing and mathematics in order to graduate from high school. Science would be added in 2010. This retesting program will provide students every opportunity to succeed. The new law also makes sure teachers receive clearer academic standards so they can do an ever better job helping students learn what they need to know.



School levy relief

Another new law will let school districts, like ours in Federal Way, collect all of the money authorized under a voter-approved levy, even if it exceeds a state formula for local funding. Levy amounts are determined by a complicated formula that relies in part on a "best guess" of anticipated state funds. When the state, because of our extreme budget crisis, had to defer expected I-728 and I-732 monies, many districts could not collect voter-approved levy dollars. This new law gives districts flexibility over the short term and also links "equalization" dollars to the formula, very important to the Federal Way School District.

Help for seniors with...

Health care costs

Seniors who have Medicare Supplement insurance can once again save hundreds of dollars a year — some say as much as \$300 — off the cost of their premiums. This new law, in effect right now and in time for annual renewals, gives seniors back their discounts for various payment methods, including electronic fund transfers or annual installments, and for spouses. Seniors came up with the idea for the legislation, seniors lobbied for it and the state's largest senior organization, AARP Washington, endorses it. It's a great example of how the people we represent as legislators can make a difference in their lives and the lives of others throughout the state.



Property taxes

I want to do all I can to help seniors protect their homes. A new law I supported increases the amount of money you can earn and still be eligible for property tax exemptions. If you're on a fixed income and have a disability, you should now get more relief from high property taxes. This is the right thing to do. I'll continue working to create even more much deserved breaks like this for our communities' seniors.

Keeping affordable housing within reach

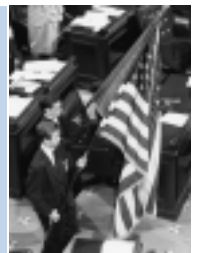
I'm pleased to have co-sponsored and helped pass a new law to ensure affordable condominium housing will continue to be available. Working with Rep. Rodney Tom of Bellevue, we constructed a whole new approach to addressing the state's crisis in condominium construction. The legislation, which was included in a broader condominium package, provides a new way to insure new construction, with a focus on building condominiums correctly in the first place so homeowners are protected and get quality homes.

Legislation to help create jobs

The good news is we passed legislation to continue tax incentives for a wide array of employers that create high-tech, high-wage jobs. Some 560 companies are benefiting from them. It's these employers that will drive our economy in the future and help Washington become more competitive in this growing sector.

Local students participate in 2004 Legislature

One of the best parts of representing you in Olympia is hosting local students from home as pages.



I want to thank and recognize Gary Belvin, Sarah Engelhart, Anna Voloshina, Devin Gleason, and Elisa Lopez for helping out at the House of Representatives during the 2004 session. It's a great opportunity to learn about how state government works and meet other students from across the state.

Students and parents will find more information about the Washington page program on my Web site: <http://hrc.leg.wa.gov/members/priest.htm>



Rep. Priest confers with a fellow lawmaker during a committee meeting.

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Skip Priest
Representative

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